

**Expositions on the Semantic Potentials of some Nigerian English Expressions
used in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic: Adapting to the Evolving
Landscape of Language**

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Abstract

This study expounds on the meaning potentials of some Nigerian English expressions used in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic. It is observed that English language spoken in Nigeria is distinct from the British Standard English. The Language Variation Theory was adopted to guide the study. Descriptive design was used for analysis and data were collected from primary sources. A total of 130 Nigerian English expressions were collected from participants through observation while 30 expressions were selected for data presentation and analysis. The data for this study were collected from conversations between friends and colleagues. Also, Nigerian English has semantic and pragmatic values, but can only be appreciated by Nigerian speakers in terms of the vocabulary, phrases, and other larger expressions that are rich with idiomatic and proverbial colourations. The study recommends that English Teachers Association in Nigeria should use their platforms to promote research in Nigerian English. Efforts should be made to produce more comprehensive dictionary for Nigerian English.

Keywords: Nigerian English, semantic potentials, language variation, British Standard English

Introduction

English is a global language and has billions of speakers worldwide. Jowitt (2005) informed that second-language speakers of English are many and can be found almost everywhere in the world. The English language was transported to other parts of the world through British imperialism. The new speakers were influenced by their cultures (languages) leading to the emergence of varieties of English such as American English, Canadian English, Australian English, Indian English, South African English, and of course, Nigerian English (Ogunsiji, 2014).

Non-native speakers of English are the majority when compared to native speakers, however, the speakers do so as a second language, foreign language, international language speakers, and for specific professional purposes (McKay, 2002). Sociolinguistics has established the fact that language develops its varieties through regional contact it has with other languages. That is why culture and other environmental factors make up the variables for a sociolinguistics analysis. Ofulue (2011) presents English language as evidence of this worldwide language contact phenomenon, leading to language variation and change. The author designates this phenomenon as 'World Englishes, 'Modern Englishes, and 'New Englishes. No doubt, the variations are seen in different levels of the English language, that is, phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

At the semantic level, research is focused on meaning. In this process, linguists agree on the existence of complexity, especially when dealing with cultural elements. Language cannot be separated from culture, instead, language and culture complement each other. English language as used in Nigeria has accumulated certain features, which are cultural (environmental), motivating its designation as "Nigerian English" (Ogunsiji, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

English language that is spoken in Nigeria has evolved into a distinct variety shaped by the nation's socio-cultural environment and indigenous languages. However, many Nigerian English expressions used in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic carry meanings that differ significantly from British Standard English. They often rely on cultural knowledge, idioms, and contextual interpretation. Without proper documentation and semantic analysis, these expressions remain misunderstood, misinterpreted, or labelled as errors, despite their communicative relevance within the Nigerian context. The lack of systematic exposition on the semantic and pragmatic potentials of these expressions creates a gap in understanding how meaning is constructed among Nigerian speakers. This study therefore addresses the problem of insufficient scholarly analysis of Nigerian

English expressions used within Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, particularly how culture shapes their meanings and how they differ from standard British usage.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to make a semantic analysis of some Nigerian English expressions. Specifically, the study was designed to:

- i. Identify and categorise the major semantic shifts, loanwords, and neologisms present in the Nigerian English expressions commonly used in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic; and
- ii. examine the extent to which these Nigerian English expressions enhance or hinder clarity and effectiveness of communication among students and staff in the institution.

Research Questions

- i. What types of semantic shifts, loanwords, and neologisms are most common in the Nigerian English expressions as used in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic?
- ii. How do Nigerian English expressions affect clarity and effectiveness of communication among students and staff in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic?

Review of Basic Concepts

Nigerian English

Jowitt (2005) declared that Nigerians have domesticated and acculturated a new type of English language known as "Nigerian English." This English dialect is distinguished by cultural components from Nigeria. Despite Nigeria's multiculturalism, all facets of the English language spoken there are greatly influenced by the local languages of Nigeria. Nigerian English is just one of the new English language variations that are emerging globally, according to Ajani (2007), the different ways of using the English language in the Nigerian speech community are necessary for the existence of a single superordinate variety of the language. Additionally, Ajani listed a few characteristics that set Nigerian English apart from other dialects spoken around the globe and divides these into spoken and written usages that are lexical, semantic, syntactic, and phonological.

Previously, Odumuh (1987) divided Nigerian English, often known as the "national language," into three varieties to reflect the impacts of the three main regional languages

of Nigeria. These English dialects are Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Odumuh argues that these dialect varieties feed into and enhance the superior Nigerian English.

According to Bamgbose (1995), Nigerian English is at par with other officially recognised varieties of the language, since linguists worldwide have universally acknowledged it. The author distinguished among the techniques of innovation, deviation, and interference.

- i. The first method links the use of English in Nigeria to the influence of native Nigerian languages.
- ii. The second method labels any deviations from this model as aberrant by drawing a contrast with "native English.
- iii. The third method is the creative approach, which emphasises using the English language and regional languages to generate original terms and idioms. Bamgbose believes that this method has the added benefit of acknowledging Nigerian English's independent status.

Bamiro (2013) claims that the various historical, geographical, political, and socio-cultural elements that give rise to the new Englishes are primarily responsible for their unique traits, linguistic identities, and cultural identities. Nigerian English is therefore, not the same as Ghanaian or Indian English. Still, each variation has a number of subvarieties or dialects that are representative of its multilingual setting. The degree of English localisation will determine the extent of impact at different linguistic levels in each variety. In Nigeria, the English language has been spoken for almost three centuries.

There are numerous reasons for Nigeria's variation in English language usage. Many Nigerian academics have tried to categorise the English language as used by Nigerians due to its unique characteristics.

The following categories:

- a) "Perverse Nigerianism," contains borrowed terms, neologisms, category/semantic changes, and words that widen meaning. The loan terms, such as: "agbada," "garri," "akara," "amala," "tuwo," and "eba," are words that have been borrowed from a variety of Nigerian languages.
- b) Coinages/ neologisms. The examples of coinages and neologisms are "bride price," "head-tie," "flowing gown," "chewing stick," "go-slow," "chewing gum," and so on.
- c) Semantic shift refers to the gradual transition from one concept of meaning to another.

English Language in Nigerian Socio-Cultural Environment

Southern Nigeria is thought to have been the site of the initial interactions between Nigerians and British. As a result, a reduced form of English communication known as Broken arose between the English men and the Nigerians. Three main phases may be distinguished in the history of English adoption in Nigeria: the pre-missionary era, the missionary era, and the post-unification of the Southern and Northern Protectorates. It is crucial to note that these periods blend into one another, making it difficult to draw a precise border between them. Nigerians were increasingly exposed to the English language as a result of these activities (slave trade, missionary activity, colonisation, economic trade, and others). Nigeria took great pride in its more than three hundred languages and numerous linguistic variants, even before English arrived.

The fundamental components of the languages spoken in Nigeria are the entirety of Nigerian cultural patterns and behavioural patterns (Onuigbo & Eyisi, 2008). According to Kperogi (2015), culture is the intricate sum of human knowledge, morality, beliefs, arts, practices, and technological advancements that are passed down and shared from one generation to the next. Cultural practices are intricate lifestyles that are inherited by all members of a society across many generations. A people's beliefs, customs, language, art, technology, clothing styles, food preparation and preparation methods, political and economic structures, and rituals all constitute their culture. Like other cultures, Nigerian culture is made up of both material and non-material elements. The former is usually more explicit and includes things like technology, products of the local industry, and artifacts like knowledge, morals, language, attitudes, and values. The non-material elements frequently influence people's perception and create the circumstances around Nigerians. Since it differs greatly from those of English culture, it is mostly to blame for the variations found in several English lexical terms in Nigeria.

The English and local languages often represent what is possible in Nigerian culture. Culture is a pattern of behaviour, whereas language is a manifestation of human activity. Since language is ingrained in culture, it is clear that the two are intertwined. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of "Linguistic Relativity and Determinism," which holds that humans debate the world from the perspective of their language, supports this. British colonisation of Nigeria left elements of British culture in Nigerian culture, which has persisted since the country's socio-political and economic past. An educated Nigerian becomes bilingual or bicultural, speaking English first and subsequently their mother tongue.

In Nigeria's multilingual environment of education, communication, and administration, English now plays a significant role. Effective English language learning becomes essential in Nigeria. Nonetheless, a few aspects of the native Nigerian culture are not

shared by the English language. Thus, Nigerian conceptualisation systems differ from English conceptualisation systems. As a result, Nigeria has made great progress in creating unique cultural meaning systems, which are reflected in English, their second language. Words related to food, family, clothes, among others are examples of cultural terms that primarily cause this and semantic analysis of various expressions is required.

Theoretical Framework: Language Variation Theory -William Labov (1964)

Language Variation theory is also known as Language Variation and Change or Variational Sociolinguistics. This theory started in 1960s when William Labov got involved in the study on “sound change in Martha’s Vineyard.” The Variation theory became pronounced when Labov conducted PhD dissertation research in 1964 on the topic, “The Social Stratification of English in New York City.” It is believed to have been ground-breaking research as it focused on the sociolinguistic patterns of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the United States. This work became fundamental to the systematic study of language variation and change (Uzoigwe, 2010). Language Variation theory focuses on the systematic study of variation in language, particularly how language varies across different social and situational contexts. Language Variation theory recognises that language use is not uniform and that linguistic variation occurs due to social factors such as geography, ethnicity, social class, and specific communicative contexts.

Variations in language occur at different levels. There is phonetic variation, a kind that is seen in pronunciation (Hoffman & Walker, 2010). There are also morphological and syntactic variations, dealing with grammar. Semantic variation affects the meaning of words and longer expressions. Words assume different meanings based on dialects. Language change is compelled by both socio-linguistic factors and psycholinguistic factors. Socio-linguistic factors are those factors found outside a language system, while psycholinguistic factors are found within a system. To understand language variation, one needs to pay attention to both the language and the society in which the language is spoken (Ogunsiji, 2010).

Language use varies from one geographical location (ethnic group) to the other. This is clearly seen in Nigeria’s use of the English language. The English language was introduced to Nigeria during British imperialism in the midst of more than 300 languages and language varieties. These second-language speakers of English have different cultures that are in sharp contrast to English. However, they have to learn the English language for wider communication. Therefore, native languages have a heavy influence on all aspects of the English language including pronunciation, word formation

processes, word order, and meaning. This theory supports the variation of English language in Nigeria, which led to the designation, "Nigerian English".

Methodology

Research Design

A descriptive design is adopted for the study. This design is most suitable for expositions on the meaning potentials of some Nigerian English expressions used in Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic. A total of 130 Nigerian English expressions were collected from participants through observation while 30 expressions were selected through random sampling method. Data for this study were collected from interviews of friends and colleagues. Other expressions that served as data were collected from social media chats (WhatsApp groups) and the rest were collected from interaction with students of Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic. Some speakers were interviewed to interpret the meaning of the expressions that are commonly used by people.

Data Presentation

S/N	Nigerian English Expressions	Semantic and Pragmatic Interpretation	British Standard version
1	The lady's fiancée has started doing something on her head.	This involves the process of offering a bride price to get married to a woman. In Nigerian culture, the process of marriage requires a man to pay a certain amount of money as prescribed by the woman's family along with other food items, drinks, and household items. A man begins to do something on a woman's head when he is introduced to the potential in-laws and offers drinks or other items.	To commence Marriage rite
2	The price of goods has gone up.	A hike in the price of goods is perceived as going up in Ibibio. The local language describes high cost of goods as going up.	The price of goods has skyrocketed.

		The speakers therefore render it as going up based on the cultural view of pricing.	
3	Stop bringing my leg outside	Stop exposing (embarrassing) me. This meaning is more of pragmatic instead of semantic. The expression derives its meaning from the local language. It serves as an idiomatic expression, warning an erring person to save the face of the speaker.	Shield the embarrassment
4	The sun has gone down	The sunset is described in this way based on the traditional perception that the sun gradually sets by going down. While looking at the sun in the evening, the traditional society sees a sun that goes lower or down until it disappears.	It is sunset
5	Bend down and enjoy your madam	To 'bend down' is to be humble. When a person is advised to bend down, he is urged to be loyal and humble to his or her superior. This phrase is a direct transfer meaning from the local language.	Be humble to your boss.
6	His father is a big man	'Big man' refers to a wealthy man or rich man. In the local culture, wealthy people are described as 'big' because of their influence in society.	His father is wealthy and influential
7	The woman that has body	A chubby person is described as someone that has 'body'. In Ibibio language, it is perceived that a plus-sized person has a body while a slim person does not have a body.	A chubby lady...
8	That boy is eyeing me.	The boy watches me. It denotes looking at someone. However, when a woman insinuates that a man is eyeing her, it connotes a romantic signal from the man. Probably, the man looks with lust.	Eye contact expressing lust.
9	They are doing man-know-man	The act of favouritism is termed man-know-man in Nigerian parlance. This compound word is coined following the network of people, which necessitates favouritism.	Favouritism of a particular person
10	I am coming	In the local language of Ibibio, someone says, 'I am coming' to indicate that he will	I will be with you soon

- surely come back as soon as possible. The meaning of this expression is determined by context (the speaker and the hearer as well as the situation).
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|----|--|--|---|
| 11 | He is playing 419 | He is fraudulent. The digit "419" is coined to mean fraud in Nigerian English. Scamming is literally considered to be a game in Nigeria's social environment | He is fraudulent |
| 12 | I like eating loi-loi in the afternoon | Loi-loi is a traditional solid food processed from cassava. Nigerians eat loi-loi with soup. Almost every Nigerian is familiar with loi-loi. This is one of the words borrowed from the local languages and used in English. | I enjoy fermented cassava |
| 13 | I need a chewing stick | The word 'chewing stick' is coined to name a stick which is traditionally used to cleanse the teeth. People use sticks that are considered to be medicinal and is able to serve the purpose of cleaning the teeth in the morning. Since this custom is only known to traditional Nigeria societies, it does not have an English name, hence the coinage. | A medicinal African stick believed to protect against tooth decay |
| 14 | How was your night? | This expression has a different usage and meaning in Nigerian context. Its original meaning in the Standard British English deals more on romantic relations between couples. In Nigeria English, it is used as a part of prolonged greeting, requesting the listener to say little about their night rest and well-being | Implying a good night rest |
| 15 | I want to buy hot pure/bottle water | To the average buyers, the water in sachets and plastic bottles are either cold or hot. Cold pure/bottled water is frozen water while hot water is not frozen. | Cool bottled water |
| 16 | Me I don't have problem | Many speakers introduce the personal pronoun, which should originally occupy an object position in a sentence. It comes | I have no problem |

		first at the beginning of a sentence for emphasis.	
17	The girl is doing eye service/notice-me	"Eye service" is a compound word coined in Nigeria to mean 'pretentious service'. "Notice-me" is another compound word that has a similar meaning. They all refer to treacherous activity or service that some people render so as to achieve a selfish goal.	pretence
18	My head is paining me	Pain in the head might refers to head-ache and extreme stress. Speakers use this expression to indicate tiredness and their desire to have a rest.	I have a headache
19	Sir, I want to sign my course form	The meaning of this statement is only understood above the choice of words of the speaker. The student is actually requesting a lecturer or an administrative officer to append his or her signature on the document presented by the student. The use of this expression might have been motivated by politeness.	Could you sign my course forms please?
20	You are sick upstairs	When someone acts in a deviant manner, others can describe him as being "sick upstairs". This means calling someone stupid or foolish. Being sick upstairs suggests unstable mentality.	Mentally ill
21	I don't like people that carry their shoulders up	This is an idiomatic expression describing pomposity and pride. To 'carry shoulder up' is to look down on others or display superiority	Pride
22	Our market will buy on Fridays	In Ibibio language or culture, markets can be described as buying on a particular day, which is the market day.	Specific market day
23	The food is sweet	In British Standard English, food is delicious. In Nigerian English, food is sweet as it tastes good.	The food is delicious
24	He is a village man	'Village man' is a compound name that is coined to describe an uncivilised person. It does not refer to a man from the village; it refers to someone whose social behaviour	Uncivilised person

		and mentality falls below expectation of others	
25	The hold-up is too much	'Hold-up' is a coinage describing traffic jam. Hold-up is also called 'go-slow' in Nigeria.	Traffic jam
26	His oga told me to wait	The word 'oga' is borrowed from the Yoruba language. It means master or a boss. It is generally used for any superior in the work place, business place and in the apprenticeship system in Nigeria.	Boss
27	Tell that Mama-put to give me something to eat	'Mama-put' is a compound word coined to name or describe the roadside food vendors. Along the streets in the cities and rural areas, women sell food. Mama-put refers to such women who sell food in the streets.	Food vendor
28	Thank God, iyawo is here	'Iyawo' is a Yoruba word for a married woman. Many Nigerian English speakers specifically call all married Yoruba women iyawo.	Wife, mother
29	Don't allow him to deceive you with his sweet mouth	'Sweet mouth' is a compound word for eloquence, well-articulated speech or convincing utterances. However, a person who has sweet mouth is considered to be deceptive.	Deceit
30	You want to run faster than your shadow	This is a proverbial statement condemning unnecessary attempts to outsmart others.	Tricky smartness

Discussion

Nigeria's socio-cultural environment and Nigerian English

The socio-cultural setting of every society is formed by the culture, language, customs, activities, and social events. The Nigerian society is rich with unique customs and practices as well as social activities. These features have great influence and have contributed to the meaning of English expressions as used by Nigerians. For example, most Nigerian customs on marriage perceive bride price as "paying for the head of a woman." With this conception, the use of English to describe this process is rendered as "paying for a woman's bride price" or "doing something on a woman's head."

The cultural practice has influenced this description because the speakers have transferred the native concept into the English language (Oyeleye, 2014). To the Nigerian speakers of English, this expression is acceptable. In the same vein, speakers can simply say “The food is sweet”. In the Nigerian parlance, whatever tastes good is sweet including food. The speakers might not see any need to use another word for ‘sweet’. Again, in describing the economic status of a person, Nigerian speakers use the word ‘big’. In the cultural concept of wealth, people are considered to be “big” if they are rich. These expressions indicate that the social environment and the traditional perception of activities and events affect how English language is used.

Sociological ideologies affect or determine how people describe actions and events using their language. Where a second language (representing a different culture) does not share a particular social ideology, the usage of the second language by the new learners is bound to be influenced by the first language. These new speakers must continue to express their social ideas in the new language by manipulating the language. The ideas that are presented in the data above are expressed in English language, however, the ideas flow from the local Nigerian languages. In other words, the words that are selected and arranged to convey meaning in local languages are translated into English so as to represent the same meaning. Igboanusi, (2002) ascribed this deviation as semantic interference. Amachaghi (2021) also opined that although most Nigerian English expressions are characterised by errors they have semantic values.

Adegbite, (2003) stated that the English language in Nigeria is distinct because of historical, geographical, political, and socio-cultural factors. Political activities and other social events have contributed to the uniqueness of Nigerian English. Examples can be seen in the coinage of words like “Obidient” and “Atikulated” (words coined during 2019 and 2023 general elections in Nigeria).

In various social media platforms, new words are created and used by Nigerians. Interestingly, only Nigerians and those who follow developments in Nigeria can relate to the meaning of those expressions. Some words are products of hybridisation or loan words from any of the Nigerian local languages. Another example can be seen in the trend of migration by Nigerians seeking greener pastures abroad. This wave has gradually become a social ideology and to describe it, a Yoruba word, “Japa” (to escape) has been borrowed to represent this social ideology. Further, scamming in Nigeria is described as “419” in Nigerian English and sometimes, referred to as “wayo” (Yoruba word, meaning treachery). However, the mode of operation of the present scammers no longer fits the description of “419”, therefore, a compound word, “Yahoo boys” has been

created to name the activity of most desperate men, who engage in internet or cyber fraud to dupe, defraud, scam, hack, or phish unsuspecting members of the public.

Language has the ability to generate new words according to the social activities and events in society. Nigerian English has continued to expand in vocabulary to account for developments in Nigeria's social cultural environment. Political events, social movements, the introduction of new ideas and innovations have resulted in neologisms, changes in the meaning of existing words and phrases, and so forth.

Semantic and Pragmatic Value of the Nigerian English expressions

The essence of language is to express meaning (Maduako, 2003). Where a group of words fail to meet communicative demand, the utterances become noise. Nigerian English has the duty to enhance communication among its users. Based on the social environment of Nigeria, Standard British English cannot solve all communication needs of the people. This gap necessitated the emergence of Nigerian English. Therefore, meaning, as it suits the Nigerian social environment, whether denotative or connotative is conveyed by Nigerian English. To fulfil the semantic role in the Nigerian context, Ejie and Ikupa (2024) opine that one of the most important aspects of Nigerian English is its incorporation of Nigerian expressions and proverbs into the language. Indeed, the domestication of English language in Nigeria is the merger of the English language and the Nigerian culture.

Yahaya (2022, p. 2) quotes Achebe (1975), "We should bend the language (English) to accommodate our thought patterns and perform tasks suitable to us instead of looking at it as the language of the colonisers" This statement explains the existence and uniqueness of Nigerian English and significantly its purpose. Standard British English lacks some culture-specific elements in the Nigerian socio-cultural environment. However, in the view of (Ekpe 2010), Nigerian culture has assimilated the English language and beautified it with proverbs, idioms, and vocabulary; its usage is often intra-national rather than international. To enjoy the semantic and pragmatic value of Nigerian English, one must be familiar with Nigerian culture, socio-political activities, and history.

At the level of vocabulary, the Nigerian English has borrowed from major languages like Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa as well as other languages. These loan words have retained their original meaning from the donor languages. Words like 'Oga' (Master), 'Iyawo' (married Yoruba woman) 'loi- loi' (solid food from cassava), and others make up the vocabulary of Nigerian English. The Nigerian English is also rich with neologisms/coinages. *Mama-put, sweet mouth, eye-service, chewing stick, notice-me, go-slow*, and many others are coinages in Nigerian English.

Phrases and sentences reflect the social ideologies and culture of Nigeria. The meaning derived from some larger expressions is highly contextual. The speakers of Nigerian English can decode them because they share the culture and have a measure of social awareness (Anchimbe, 2007). There are Expressions such as *Stop bringing my leg outside*, *You are sick upstairs*, *He is playing 419*, *How was your night?* All of these have meanings based on the Nigerian context. Some meanings can be derived at semantic level while others are derived at the pragmatic level.

Summary of Findings

- a) The native speaker's English in Nigeria could not appropriately serve all the communicative needs of Nigerian speakers due to cultural differences. Therefore, the English language has been influenced by multiple cultures that exist in Nigeria in addition with socio-political activities. This has resulted in neologisms, lending of words, and semantic shift.
- b) Nigerian English has semantic and pragmatic values, but can only be appreciated by Nigerian speakers and others, who are aware of the socio-cultural environment of Nigeria. Nigerian English vocabulary, phrases, and other larger expressions are rich with idiomatic and proverbial colourations.

Conclusion

Language is culture specific. The socio-environment plays a key role in assigning meaning to utterances as demonstrated in the study. Nigerian English as used by Nigerians has served for effective communication. In fact, it represents the culture of Nigerian people by providing words of Nigerian origin and phrases which are understood by Nigerian speakers. Some proverbial words that are expressed in native languages are currently translated into English language by Nigerians and these expressions help to convey messages to the listeners.

There are identifiable differences between the English language spoken in Nigeria and the native speaker's English especially at the level of meaning. The socio-cultural environment of every society is made up of ideologies, perceptions, customs, activities, and social events. Nigerian society is rich with unique customs and practices as well as, social activities and these determine and shape meaning. This is the key contributor to the variation in the meaning of expressions in the English language spoken in Nigeria.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- Nigerians should continue to promote Nigerian English and allow the local languages to provide all necessary elements that can help to fill the gap created by the native speaker' English.
- Language teaching associations in Nigeria should use their platforms to promote research in Nigerian English. Efforts should be made to produce more comprehensive dictionary for Nigerian English.

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